

Adult Children of Alcoholics

Current research and treatment for alcoholism illustrates the extent of damage alcoholism can cause: it affects those well beyond the alcoholic individual, specifically the members of his or her family. While the majority of children of alcoholics grow up to become healthy, productive adults, a significant number will have difficulties that plague them throughout their lives.

By understanding the characteristics shared by adult children of alcoholics (ACOAs), one can take the first step toward recovery from the emotional and psychological effects of growing up in an alcoholic home.

Roles Played Children of Alcoholics

ACOAs typically have one of two reactions to their upbringing: some put the past behind them and resist the idea of being victims of their parents' addiction, while others are plagued by insecurity, relationship difficulties and substance-abuse problems of their own.

By their own reports, many ACOAs were shaped by similar emotional experiences and displayed common reactions. The anger, uncertainty and deception that can accompany alcoholism can be a galvanizing force in the development of a young child. Author Claudia Black pioneered the concept that distinct personality types develop in alcoholic families. Therapists who work with ACOAs observe that these roles in the family include:

- The family hero: These children feel responsible for maintaining order and normalcy in the home. As adults, they are often outwardly successful but carry with them the strains of growing up too fast. Therapists also use the term *parentified child* to describe a child who has taken on inappropriate adult responsibilities at a young age.
- The lost child: These children sometimes report an overwhelming sense of parental neglect and often deal with the tough times by disappearing. Their ability to fade into the background may help them avoid pain or mistreatment in the short run. In the long run, however, this coping skill can lead to serious problems such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.
- The scapegoat: Family scapegoats often have trouble in school and frequently are called to the offices of guidance counselors and juvenile-probation officers, thereby drawing attention away from the alcoholic parent. Because an alcoholic uses denial ("I'm not the one with the problem") as a means of continuing destructive drinking, focusing on a family scapegoat distracts attention away from the parent's destructive alcoholic behavior.
- The peacekeeper: These children take on the age-inappropriate role of emotional referee in the battles that rage in alcoholic families. They often develop an ability to sense trouble brewing and try to smooth things over before the situation blows up. As with the family hero, carrying adult emotional baggage can be extremely stressful for a child or teen. They often take on the burden of their parents' emotional turmoil by neglecting their own emotional needs.

Children can take on more than one of these roles or not exhibit any of these traits. However, when first reading these types, it is common for an ACOA to hear a particular one and say, "That's me!"

Feelings Experienced by ACOAs

According to Janet Geringer Woititz's *Adult Children of Alcoholics*, ACOAs often:

- Guess at what "normal" behavior is rather than having a good sense of it;
- Have difficulty following a project through from beginning to end;
- Lie when it would be just as easy to tell the truth;
- Are very hard on themselves and have a difficult time relaxing or having fun;
- Take themselves very seriously and have difficulty allowing their needs to be met;
- Have difficulty with intimate relationships and constantly seek approval and affirmation;
- Have a persistent feeling that they are somehow different from other people;
- Overact to changes over which they have no control;
- Are either overly responsible or overly irresponsible;
- Have difficulty relying on others and do not know how to follow;
- Are overly loyal even when confronted with evidence that the loyalty is undeserved; and
- Can be impulsive. They tend to lock themselves into a course of action without giving serious consideration to alternative behaviors or possible consequences. This impulsiveness leads to confusion, self-loathing and loss of control over their environment.

Support for ACOAs

If you or someone you know has issues related to being raised by an alcoholic parent, there are several ways to receive help and support:

- Individual or group therapy: Individual therapy can help an ACOA recognize destructive thought patterns and behaviors and replace them with more positive ones. Cognitive-behavioral therapy uses techniques such as positive self-talk to help patients replace "old tapes" with new empowering ones. Group therapy, facilitated by a trained counselor, can have the added benefit of support from others with similar experiences. In either case, make sure your therapist has extensive experience treating the issues of family alcoholism.
- Books and other literature: There have been many important books written on ACOA. Among the classics are *Adult Children of Alcoholics*, by Janet Geringer Woititz, and *It Will Never Happen to Me*, by Claudia A. Black. Additionally, the Adult Children of Alcoholics World Service Organization offers a variety of pamphlets, books and programs.
- Self-help groups for ACOAs: A common first reaction for an adult child taking the first step toward recovery by attending an ACOA meeting is, "I feel like they have been reading my mail!" Finding a good group and working the steps recommended can be a great way to resolve the issues ACOAs face. Experts advise individuals dealing with their own substance-abuse issues to attend Alcoholics Anonymous and seek treatment for their own addiction before addressing their ACOA issues. For a group in your area, contact your employee-assistance program or the Adult Children of Alcoholics World Service Organization at www.adultchildren.org.

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